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‘No fee was to be charged for their services’: British Athletics Coaching in the 1930s

For fuller coverage of this topic see:

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Harold Perkin described inter-war British society as being in a ‘transitional stage, a sort of halfway house in which remnants of Victorianism...co-existed with harbingers of the future’ and this applied to all aspects of social, political and economic life, including sport, where class dynamics continued to exert an influence. Since the inception of the BOC in 1905 all six of its presidents and ten of its thirteen chairpersons held aristocratic titles and this elitism was reflected by the large proportion of university men, including twelve Oxbridge blues, who comprised the track and field team at Stockholm in 1912. This led one critic to observe that ‘Caste rules the world of athletes and all is snobbery...At present the whole tendency seems to be that only public school and university men shall have all the chances.’ Little changed in the post war period and continuities between the old and the new are examined here through the lens of sports coaching. This paper draws on biographical sources, contemporary accounts and texts to explore the ongoing influence of amateurism through a brief analysis of a group of volunteer athletics coaches and argues that amateurism left a legacy that continued to influence mid to late twentieth-century athletics.

Concerns about increasing American influence engendered numerous cultural critiques in the inter-war period. Hollywood films, fashions in clothing, drinking, dance and popular music had a major impact on British society, although a vociferous minority condemned them as vulgar, commercialised, and mass-produced. Elite athletes, however, often regarded the US as ‘the exemplar of modernity, technology, and progress’ and respected the nation’s dominance in international sport, achieved through ‘rigorous and extensive training’. Every American college, university or club, had expert professional coaches whose livelihood depended upon competitive success, resulting in the adoption of a highly systematic coach-centred model, emphasizing excellence and winning, even in the schools. During the interwar years, this American coaching model was rejected in Britain where amateurism remained the dominant influence. A late-Victorian public school educated elite had used sport and the ethos of amateurism, with its emphasis on fair play, participation and socialising with peers rather than on victory, to distinguish itself from other middle-class groups. An important corollary was the principle of voluntarism, which resulted in the rationalisation of sport being undertaken by those with time, income, and social influence. Their antagonism towards commercialised sport encompassed an antipathy to professional coaches. Amateurs preferred to view sporting performance as the product of natural talent rather than systematic training and they employed definitions of an amateur as one who had never ‘taught any athletic exercise as a means of pecuniary gain’ to exclude professional pedagogues.

As other countries began to take sport more seriously in the inter-war period, the international failures of British athletes became increasingly common. British discourses suggested that even if foreign competitors were more successful, the British approach remained superior. If a British athlete lost, this was because he/she was more ‘sporting’, less ‘professional’, thus giving Britain the moral high ground. Much of the rhetoric continued to juxtapose British and American coaching provision. One commentator decried the American system as ‘the mass production of athletes’ and argued that American coaches were ‘apt to crush individuality – to refuse genius the right to its efficacious eccentricities’. In 1933, Lyon said, ‘Let us hope that the British coach will remain the exact antithesis of the American football coach. The latter says: ‘Win somehow! I don’t mind how but win you must!’ The former says: ‘Well, I hope we shall win and I know you’ll do your utmost. But, by heaven, we’d rather lose than win by doing something unsporting. After all it’s only a game.’

‘Honorary’ Coaches

Before the war, A.B. George had argued that only amateur coaches had any original ideas about training and that they had been responsible for any innovations in competitive sport. He later noted that the recruitment of national representatives and Oxbridge Blues as coaches was critical since their experience inevitably made them ‘qualified to instruct and coach’; although many professional coaches believed that amateur coaching was often worse than useless. These issues remained unresolved well into the interwar years, even though professional coaches continued to operate successfully, such as Cambridge University coach Alec Nelson, Oxford University coach Bill Thomas, and Harry Andrews,

who accompanied the 1924 team to Paris. In contrast to the attitudes adopted by these men, amateur coaches connected with the Achilles Club, created by leading figures from Oxford and Cambridge universities continued to argue that an ideal coach would know that the rigid application of a 'system' could ruin a naturally gifted athlete. When members of Oxford University Athletic Club undertook the coaching of local schoolboys in 1926, the aim of this 'expert coaching' from University Blues was to 'train them to team work. We do not want to find champions. We shall be satisfied if we make them clean, healthy sportsmen and good citizens'.

This ongoing preference for amateur coaching was clear in the year before the Berlin Olympics when several honorary coaches were appointed to instruct at the Loughborough summer school for athletics. Some of these men appeared again later that year in a longer list of amateur athletes and officials willing to give talks, lectures and demonstrations to clubs and schools. As keen amateurs and volunteers, 'no fee was to be charged for their services', although it was expected that out-of-pocket expenses would be met. In many ways, the composition of this list reflected the traditional profiles for amateur coaches who came from educational institutions, the armed forces, medicine, law and finance, as well as other middle-class occupations. For these men, coaching was a hobby and they lacked the resources and knowledge to be able to match their professional American counterparts. Many of them also acted as administrators, diluting further the time that they could devote to coaching. Ernest Neville was honorary secretary of Surrey Walking Club and president of the Race Walking Association from 1920-22 while William Palmer, who was on the Southern Committee of the AAA, was president of Herne Hill Harriers between 1921-22 and a walking judge at the 1936 and 1948 Games.

Herbert Pash was honorary secretary of Essex County Cycling and Athletic Association from 1908 to 1920 and then chairman. He was made AAA life vice president in 1934 and president of London Athletic Club in 1935. Others were involved in Olympic administration. John Wadmore was manager of the 1928 Olympic Team, while Arthur Turk, known as the 'Grand Old Man' of British athletics and a life vice-president of the AAA, oversaw the 1932 and 1936 Olympic teams. Denis Lyons was the first chairman of Gloucestershire AAA in 1925, president of Midland Counties, and an international referee at Amsterdam and at the 1930 Empire Games.

These amateurs were clearly influential in the administration and development of British athletics. They could also be quite innovative and Henry Rottenburg introduced several inventions designed to improve the sport. There were also attempts to organise coaching. Joseph McPhail became secretary of the Southern Counties Coaching Committee and organised Essex Young Athletes Courses, along with Pash and Turk, as well as sitting on the Essex Coaching Committee, chaired by Kenneth Duncan. Arthur Lewis was on the list of honorary coaches at Loughborough summer school in 1947 and by 1960, he was a lecturer at Loughborough. Malcolm Nokes served as chair of the AAA coaching committee, while George Pallett, a president of Herne Hill Harriers, was a fully qualified coach at all field events. Perhaps the most influential individual was Roland Harper, an Oxford Blue who was a finalist at the 1930 Empire Games and a semi-finalist at the 1932 Olympics. He was behind the introduction of the AAA coaching scheme in 1946 and when he succeeded Nokes as chair of the Coaching Committee, he was instrumental in appointing professional Geoff Dyson as chief coach in 1947, an appointment that paved the way for engaging further professional national coaches. Frustratingly for these coaches, however, the NGB demanded they concentrate on educating honorary coaches rather than developing elite athletes.

Germany headed the medal table at Berlin in 1936 with thirty-three golds, while Britain only achieved five, two of them on the track. The *Observer* recorded that Britain had been 'outstripped' by Germany, America, France, Italy, and Japan, and that even 'lesser' nations such as Finland, Sweden, and Hungary, had 'made us look ridiculous.' However, much of the discourse following these failures valorised the British approach to sport and the contribution of amateur coaches who 'nobly tackled the spade-work that an army of paid coaches undertake in America and on the Continent'. Although the 1936 BOA report conceded that more specialist training would improve standards, it also queried whether this would 'demonstrate anything of national importance'. Apologists for the British team argued that other nationalities employed different interpretations of amateurism and that 'our own particular amalgam of work and play expressed a better philosophy of life than those other codes which have reaped superior honours at Berlin.' The *Manchester Guardian* observed that some overseas Olympic representatives were trained in special camps for very long periods and several Olympic winners had been given valuable presents such as cars, farms, or promotion of rank, none of which was compatible with amateurism. British athletes had competed as a 'gentleman' should.

Conclusion

For many amateur sports administrators there were more important issues than poor international performances since the 1936 Games reinforced concerns over the nation's health and the debilitating pervasiveness of modern society. 'Degeneration anxiety' occupied a central role in the 1930s National Fitness Campaign, instigated with government support but characterised by an emphasis on voluntarism. Following the 1937 Physical Training and Recreation Act, a National Fitness Council was established to provide financial assistance for sporting organizations. The AAA, who emphasised they were concerned with 'exercise for the multitude, rather than competition for the specialist', requested funding to employ three full-time paid coaches to teach athletics and to train others to become coaches. The NFC initially resisted funding coaches because it was 'scarcely one of the purposes of the Act to train budding Olympic champions!' but eventually granted 75 per cent of the salaries of three coaches on the basis that they would visit clubs and schools and 'pass on enough of their own knowledge to some among those they teach to enable these in their turn to instruct their fellow members on an amateur basis.' In the end, the AAA only appointed one professional coach, Austrian Franz Stampfl, but the outbreak of war terminated his contract and the nascent coaching scheme.

Even though the interwar period saw a marked global increase in coaching utilization, British sport continued to align itself to the principles of volunteerism and amateurism. British administrators always focused on creating a contingent of honorary coaches, rather than on improving the standard of Olympic athletes, and they continued to exert control over the way in which coaching developments unfolded after 1945, despite pressure for change. In his report as secretary of the BOA following Helsinki in 1952, Duncan pointed out that British facilities and the number of good coaches were 'woefully inadequate' and NGBs had to decide whether they 'will, or can, make the all-out effort to train their Olympic teams. The day of dilettante in international competition is finished'. In his subsequent report as Chef de Mission in Melbourne in 1956, Duncan noted 'It has become apparent that we need more professional coaches'.

However, the traditionalists still held sway. In 1953, AAA secretary, E.H.L. Clynes, observed:

The association is, however, not only concerned with champions but with the average young man who wishes merely to participate in a healthy outdoors recreation, to build up a fit body and mind, in the friendly company of other athletes...This is the foundation on which the association has been built, and the sole reason why thousands of old athletes are prepared to give voluntary service to the active members as honorary coaches, honorary administrators or club officials. Without this unpaid service amateur athletics could not exist.

Holt and Mason argue that amateurism's values and structures played 'a major part in shaping British cultural identity and remained tenacious and influential' well into the twentieth century and it was not until the 1960s, that amateurism was gradually superseded by an emphasis on competition, winning and professionalism. The International Association of Athletics Federations recognised payments for competitors in 1983 and, as a result, professional coaches and training methods have become an integral part of an increasing focus on excellence in Britain, especially following the introduction of Lottery funding from 1997. However, the legacy of voluntarism and amateurism left by the Victorian gentleman remains a powerful influence in contemporary Britain where three-quarters of the estimated total of 1,109,000 coaches remain unpaid volunteers.